

THIMBLE SUMMER

Elizabeth Enright

Winner of the Newbery Medal

I. The Silver Thimble

GARNET thought this must be the hottest day that had ever been in the world. Every day for weeks she had thought the same thing, but this was really the worst of all. This morning the thermometer outside the village drug store had pointed a thin red finger to one hundred and ten degrees Fahrenheit.

It was like being inside of a drum. The sky like a bright skin was stretched tight above the valley, and the earth too, was tight and hard with heat. Later, when it was dark, there would be a noise of thunder, as though a great hand beat upon the drum; there would be heavy clouds above the hills, and flashes of heat lightning, but no rain. It had been like that for a long time. After supper each night her father came out of the house and looked up at the sky, then down at his fields of com and oats. "No," he would say, shaking his head, "No rain tonight."

The oats were turning yellow before their time, and the com leaves were tom and brittle, rustling like newspaper when the dry wind blew upon them. If the rain didn't come soon there would be no corn to harvest, and they would have to cut the oats for hay.

Garnet looked up at the smooth sky angrily, and shook her fist. "You!" she cried, "Why in time can't you let down a little rain!"

At each step her bare feet kicked up a small cloud of dust. There was dust in her hair, and up her nose, making it tickle.

Garnet was halfway between nine and ten. She had long legs and long arms, two taffy colored pigtails, a freckled nose that turned up, and eyes that were almost green and almost brown. She wore a pair of blue overalls, cut off above the knee. She could whistle between her teeth like a boy and was doing it now, very softly, without thinking. She had forgotten all about her anger at the sky.

Under its big, black fir trees the Hausers' farm lay solid and sleepy-looking at the bend in the road. There was a bed of burning red salvia flowers on the lawn, and the tractor and threshing machine stood side by side in the shade, like friendly monsters. Across the road the Hauser pigs lay slumbering and wheezing under their shelter. "Lazy fat things," said Garnet, and threw a pebble at the biggest hog, who snorted horribly and lumbered to his feet. But Garnet just laughed at him; the fence was between them.

Behind her a screen door twanged shut, and Citronella Hauser came down the steps of her house flapping a dish towel like a fan. She was a fat little girl, with red cheeks and thick yellow bangs.

"Land!" she called to Garnet. "Isn't it hot! Where you going?"

"For the mail," said Garnet. "We might go swimming," she added thoughtfully.

But no. Citronella had to help her mother with the ironing. "A fine thing to have to do on a day like this," she said rather crossly. "I bet you I'll melt all over the kitchen floor like a pound and a half of butter."

Garnet giggled at this picture and started on her way.

"Wait a minute," said Citronella, "I might as well see if there's any mail for us too."

As she walked she did different things with the dish towel. First she draped it over her head like a shawl, then she tied it around her waist but it was too tight, and it ended up tucked in the back of her belt, hanging down behind like a train.

"Days like this," remarked Citronella, "make me wish I could find a waterfall somewhere. One that poured lemonade instead of water. I'd sit under it all day with my mouth open."

"I'd rather be up on an Alp," said Garnet. "You know, one of those mountains they have in Europe. There's snow on top of them even on the hottest days of summer. I'd like to be sitting in the snow looking miles and miles down into a valley."

"Too much trouble climbing up," sighed Citronella.

They turned the corner and kept along the highway till they came to the mailboxes. There were four of them set up on narrow posts. They were big tin boxes with curved tops, and some of them tilted crazily upon their pedestals. Always they made Garnet think of thin old women in crooked sunbonnets, gossiping beside the road.

Each box was named in black, stenciled letters. Hauser, Schoenbecker, Freebody and Linden.

The Hausers usually had the most mail because they were the largest family, and Citronella and her brothers were always sending for free samples of things advertised in papers. Today there was a small bottle of hair dye and a sample of hog mash for Citronella, as well as three different kinds of tooth paste for her brother Hugo.

They peeked into old Mr. Schoenbecker's box to see if the wren's nest was still there. It was, and had been for a year. There were never any letters.

Garnet opened the box marked Linden, which was her last name, and pulled out a bulky package.

"Look, Citronella," she cried, "here's the Merchant-

Farmer's Catalogue."

Citronella grabbed it and tore off the paper wrapper. She and Garnet both loved to look at the catalogues from the big department store. In it there were pictures of everything in the world that you might wish to buy, beside a lot of other things that you mightn't, like tractor - parts and various kinds of hot-water bottles and pages and pages of union suits.

Garnet took the rest of the mail from her box. These weren't real letters, she could tell at a glance. The envelopes were thin and businesslike with small printed names of companies in upper left-hand corners, and two of them had long transparent windows in them. No, these weren't real letters. Bills, that's what they were.

Citronella was gazing at the picture of a beautiful young woman in an evening gown. Underneath the picture it said: " 'You're the top; a perfect dance frock. Sizes 14 to 40. \$11.98' "

"When I am sixteen," said Citronella dreamily, "oil my dresses are going to be like that."

But Garnet wasn't listening. Bills. She knew what that meant. Tonight her father would sit late in the kitchen, worried and silent, doing sums on a piece of paper. Long after everyone else had gone to bed, the lamp would bum and he would be there by himself. If it would only rain! Then there would be good crops and more money. She looked up at the sky. It was as smooth, as empty, as it had been for weeks.

"I've got to get back to my precious ironing board," said Citronella grimly, slapping the catalogue shut and handing it to Garnet.

They parted at the Hauser farm and Garnet couldn't help laughing at Citronella's fat back, with the dish-towel train switching after her.

As she walked up the long hill to her house she could

see the glassy river between trees. It was getting lower and lower. Pretty soon it would be too low for anything but wading.

Drops of perspiration rolled down her forehead and into her eyes like big tears. Her back felt net. She wished that she didn't have to give those bills to her father.

The shadows were getting longer when she turned in at the gate. Her brother Jay was bringing buckets of milk from the barn to the cold room under the house. He was eleven years old, tall for his age, and very dark.

"Any mail for me?" he called.

Garnet shook her head, and Jay went into the cold room.

The barn was huge and old; it lurched to one side like a bus going round a corner. Some day, when he had enough money, her father was going to build a new one. There was a big silo beside the barn and Garnet thought again, as she often had, how nice it would be to have a room there; little and round, with a window opening outward on a hinge. It would be like a room in the tower of a castle.

She stopped for a moment beside the pigpen to look at Madam Queen, the big sow, and her litter of little ones. They were still quite new, with large silky ears and tiny hoofs that made them look as if they were wearing high-heeled slippers. Madam Queen rolled over like a tidal wave, scattering her squealing babies right and left. She was an impatient mother, grunting crossly, and kicking them off when they bothered her.

Garnet hadn't named the little pigs yet. She leaned against the rail and thought of names. The largest of the litter was unusually greedy and selfish even for a pig. He stepped on his brothers and nipped their ears and pushed them out of his way. Undoubtedly he would grow up to be a prize hog like his father. Rex might be a good name for him, or Emperor, or Tyrant; something

with a large, bold sound to it. Garnet's favorite was the runt, a tiny, satiny pig with a sad face and no fighting spirit. He never got enough to eat. For some reason Timmy seemed the very name for him.

Slowly Garnet walked to the yellow house under tall maple trees and opened the kitchen door.

Her mother was cooking supper on the big black coal stove, and her little brother Donald pat on the floor making a noise like a train.

Her mother looked up. Her cheeks were red from the hot stove. "Any mail, darling?" she asked. "Bills," replied Garnet.

"Oh," said her mother and turned back to her cooking.

"And the catalogue from Merchant-Farmers," Garnet said quickly. "There's a dress in it that would look nice on you." She found the picture of "You're the top."

"I don't think it's quite my style, darling," laughed her mother looking at the dress, and softly pulling Garnet's left-hand pigtail.

Garnet set the table by the open window. Knife, fork, knife, fork, knife, fork, knife, fork but only a spoon for Donald, who managed even that so absent-mindedly that there was usually as much cereal on the outside of him as inside at the end of a meal.

In the middle of the table she put a bottle of catsup, salt and pepper, a china sugar bowl With morning-glories on it, and a tumbler-full of spoons. Then she went down to the cold room.

It was still and dim down there. A spigot dripped peacefully into the deep pod of water below, where the milk cans and stone butter crock were sunk. Garnet filled a pitcher with milk and put a square of butter on the plate she had brought. She knelt down and plunged both her arms into the Hater. It was cloudy with spilled milk but icy cold. She could feel coolness spreading

through all her veins and a little shiver ran over her.

Going in the kitchen again was like walking into a red-hot oven.

Donald had stopped being a train and had become a fire engine. He charged round and round the room hooting and shrieking. How could he be so lively, Garnet wondered. He didn't even notice the awful heat although his hair clung to his head like wet feathers and his cheeks were red as radishes.

Her mother looked out of the window. "Father's coming in," she said. "Garnet, don't give him the mail now, I want him to eat a good supper. Put it behind the calendar and I'll tend to it afterwards."

Garnet hastily pushed the bills behind the calendar on the shelf over the sink. There was a picture on the calendar of sheep grazing on a wild hillside with a vivid pink sky behind them. The name of it was Afterglow in the Highlands. Often Garnet looked at it and felt as though she were standing in that quiet place beside the sheep, hearing no sound but their grazing. It-gave her a pleasant, far-off feeling.

The screen door opened with its own particular squeak and her father came in. He went to the sink and washed his hands. He looked tired and his neck was sun-burned. "What a day!" he said. "one more like this -- " and he shook his head.

It was too hot to eat. Garnet hated her cereal. Donald whined and upset his milk. day was the only one who really ate in a business-like manner, as if he enjoyed it. He could probably eat the shingles off a house if there was nothing else handy, Garnet decided.

After she had helped with the dishes, Garnet and day put on their bathing suits and went down to the river. They had to go down a road, through a pasture, and across half a dozen sand bars before they came to a place

that was deep enough to swim in. This was a dark, quiet pool by a little island; trees hung over it and roots trailed in it. Three turtles slid from a log as the children approached, making three slowly widening circles on the still surface.

"It looks like tea," said Garnet, up to her neck in brownish lukewarm water.

"Feels like it too," said Jay. "I wish it was colder."

Still it was water and there was enough of it to swim in. They floated and raced and dove from the old birch tree bent like a bow over the pool. Jay dove very well, hardly making a splash when he entered the water, but Garnet landed flat on her stomach every time. As usual Jay cut his toe on a sharp stone and bled a great deal. As usual Garnet got caught in a swift current and had to be rescued, squealing, by Jay. With great care and trouble they built a raft out of dead branches that sank as soon as they both got on it. But nothing spoiled their fun.

When they were finally sufficiently waterlogged to be red-eyed and streaming, they went exploring on the sandy flats that had emerged from the river during the weeks of drought. There were all kinds of things to be found there; gaping clamshells colored inside like pearls; water-soaked branches with long beards of green moss; rusted tobacco tins, stranded fish, bottles, and a broken teapot.

They wandered in different directions, bending over, examining and picking things up. The damp flats had a rich, muddy smell. After a while the sun set brilliantly behind trees, but the air seemed no cooler.

Garnet saw a small object, half-buried in the sand, and glittering. She knelt down and dug it out with her finger. It was a silver thimble! How in the world had that ever found its way into the river? She dropped the old shoe, bits of polished glass, and a half dozen clam-

shells she had collected and ran breathlessly to show day.

"It's solid silver!" she shouted triumphantly, "and I think it must be magic too!"

"Magic!" said day. "Don't be silly, there isn't any such thing. I bet it's worth money, though." He looked a little envious. He had found two rather important things himself -- one was a ram's skull with moss growing out of the eye sockets, and the other was a big snapping turtle with a beak and a mean expression.

Garnet ran a finger gingerly over the turtle's beautifully marked shell.

"Let's call him Old Ironsides," she suggested. She liked naming things.

After a while it got too dark to see very well, and they went swimming again. Garnet held her thimble lightly. It was the best thing she had ever found and was sure to bring her luck, no matter what day said. She felt very happy and floated in the water, looking upwards into air that glittered with stars and fireflies.

As it grew darker the mosquitoes got very bad, and they decided to go home.

It was black and Mary, sort of, coming back across the sand. All along the wooded banks owls hooted with a velvety, lost sound; and there was one that screamed, from time to time, in a high, terrifying voice. Garnet knew that they were only owls, but still, in the hot darkness with no light but the solemn winking of the fireflies, she felt that they might be anything; soft-footed animals, come alive with the night, watching and following among the trees. day didn't pay any attention to them. He slapped his towel at the mosquitoes.

"Listen, Garnet," he said suddenly, "when I grow up I'm not going to be a farmer."

"But, day, what else can you be?" asked Garnet, surprised.

"I don't want to be a farmer and watch my good crops eaten with wheat rust or dried up with drought. I don't want to spend my life waiting for weather. I want to be out in it. On the sea. I'd like to be a sailor."

Neither of them had ever seen the ocean but it had a far wet, windy sound that excited them.

"I'll be one, too," she cried.

day just laughed at her. "You? Girls can't be sailors."

"I can be," replied Garnet firmly. "I'll be the first there ever was." And she saw herself in sailor pants, with stars on her collar, climbing up a tall rigging. There was blue, dizzy air above her, full of birds; blue, heaving water far below; and a vast wind blowing.

She was so absorbed with this picture that she forgot what she was doing and walked slam into the fence, catching her bathing suit on the barbed wire. "Crazy, why don't you look where you're going?" said day patiently, and unhooked her.

They rolled under the wire into the pasture. It was very dark, and they had to be careful where they stepped. The air was close and still.

"I don't feel like I've been swimming at all," day complained. "I'm hotter than I was before. For two cents I'd go back and take another dip."

"I wouldn't," said Garnet. "I want to go to bed." It made her feel creepy to think of swimming in the black river with all them owls carrying on. But she didn't tell day that.

The air smelled of dust and pasture flowers; penny-royal, bee balm, and ladies' tobacco. Garnet sniffed it deeply.

"Let's only be sailors in wintertime," she said. "I want to spend all my summers here."

They climbed over the pasture gate, and walked up the powdery, dusty road to the house. A single lamp

burned in the kitchen. Thro~ the window they saw their father bent over a notebook.

"Doggone it!" whispered day. "I won't ever be a farmer!"

Garnet said goodnight and tiptoed up the stairs to her room under the eaves. It was so hot there that the candle in its holder had swooned till it was bent double. Garnet straightened it and lit it from the one she had brought upstairs. Moths saw the light and came to the window, banging softly against the screen, and climbing up and down it with quick, delicate legs. Tiny insects crawled through the screen's meshes and fluttered about the flames and burned themselves. Garnet blew out the candles and lay down. It was too hot even for a sheet. She lay there, wet with perspiration, feeling the heat like heavy blankets and Listening to the soft thunder, the empty thunder, that brought no rain. After a while she fell asleep and dreamed that she was in a rowboat with Jay on a wide, flat ocean. She was rowing and it was hot work; her arms ached. Jay sat in the prow with a spy glass. "There's not a farmhouse in sight," he kept saying, "not a single one."

Late in the night Garnet woke up with a strange feeling that something was about to happen. She lay quite still, listening.

The thunder rumbled again, sounding much louder that it had earlier in the evening; almost as though it were in the earth instead of the sky, making the house tremble a little. And then slowly, one by one, as if someone were dropping pennies on the roof, came the raindrops. Garnet held her breath: the sound paused. "Don't stop!" she whispered. A noise of wind stirred in the leaves, and then the rain burst strong and loud upon the world. Garnet leaped out of bed and ran to the window. The watery air was cold against her face and as she

looked the many-branched lightning stood for an instant on the horizon like a tree on fire.

Quickly she turned and ran down the little stairway to her father's and mother's bedroom. Loudly she banged upon the door and threw it open, calling, "it's raining! It's raining hard!" She felt as though the thunderstorm were a present she was giving to them.

Her father and mother got up and went to the windows.

They could hardly believe it. But it was true. The sound of rain was everywhere, and when the Lightning came you could see it, heavy and silver as a waterfall.

Garnet flew down the next night of stairs and out of doors. In five minutes the world had changed to a violent, unfamiliar place. The thunder was like big drums, like cannons, like the Fourth of July, only louder. The rain was like a rep turned upside down; and the wind blew hugely, tossing the trees and making their branches creak. In the flashes of bright lightning Garnet saw the horses in the lower pasture, their heads raised and manes blowing. Even they seemed different.

In the house she heard her mother closing windows; quickly she ran to day's window and called to him; "Wake up, wake up! Come on out and get wet!" Her brother's astonished face appeared. "Oh boy!" he said and in less than a second was out of doors.

Squealing and yelling they ran round and round the lawn like wild animals. Garnet stubbed her toe and fell headlong into the rhubarb bed, but she didn't care. She had never been happier in her life. Jay grabbed her by the hand and they ran down the slope and through the vegetable garden. They slipped and slid, dodged bean poles and hurdled cabbages, and landed exhausted at the pasture fence.

Suddenly the air blazed with a light so brilliant that Garnet shut her eyes. At the same second there was a

noise as if the world had split in two; the ground shook under their feet. That meant the lightning had struck somewhere near by. Too near for Garnet. She heard her mother calling from the doorway and ran like a rabbit to the house.

"We were Comanche Indians doing a rain dance," she explained.

"You're soaking!" cried her mother. "You're filthy, both of you, and you'll probably catch your death of cold." But above the lamp she held her face was smiling and she said, "I declare, I wouldn't mind doing the same thing myself."

It was cool in the house now. The wind blew the curtains into Garnet's room. She put on a dry nightgown, pulled the blanket up under her chin, and Listened to the storm. For a long time it boomed and crashed and glittered, then by degrees the thunder and lightning grew less and less and disappeared entirely.

But all night long the rain fell steadily with a sound of gutters running, eaves dripping, wet leaves slapping together, water coming through a leak in the attic and dropping into a dishpan, ping-ping-ping, like someone beating a little gong.

When Garnet held her breath and Listened very carefully, it almost seemed as if she could hear roots deep in the wet earth drinking and coming to life again.

II. The Coral Bracelet

III.

IT WAS raining hard one afternoon several days later I when Garnet went to get the mail. She wore a slicker that war too short for her, and a pair of Jay's rubber boots that were too big and made a slumph, slumph noise at every step.